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- 1 Walter Kalaidjian, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry*
- 2 New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 278 (including Guide to Further Reading and Index). ISBN 978-1-107-04036-6
- 3 Tatiani Rapatzikou
- 4 Walter Kalaidjian's edited volume contains an array of nineteen essays that cover the whole spectrum of twentieth century American poetry production. The very well-informed and well-constructed contributions make this volume an indispensable source for scholars, students and general readers who are keen on exploring and familiarizing themselves with all the poetic trends and distinct poet-voices that have marked both the modernist and postmodernist poetic scene in the U.S. still dominant nowadays.
- 5 With certain of the essays focusing, as their titles reveal, on themes such as "The Emergence of 'The New Poetry'" (by John Timberman Newcomb), "Experimental Modernisms" (by Alan Golding), "American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance" (by James Smethurst), "Objectivist Poetry and Poetics" (by Rachel Blau DuPlessis), "Mid-Century Modernism" (by Stephen Burt), "Psychotherapy and Confessional Poetry" (by Michael Thurston), "Black Mountain Poetry" (by Kaplan Harris), "Beat Poetry" (by Maria Damon), "The Black Arts Movement and Black Aesthetics" (by Evie Shockley), "New York School and Surrealist Poetics" (by Edward Brunner) and "Language Writing" (by Barrett Watten), one can easily discern the thematic axes around which this particular Cambridge University volume revolves. In particular, these essay-long explorations familiarize experienced and new to the field readers with the poetry schools and movements that sprang throughout twentieth-century American poetry production with special emphasis placed on experimentation and avant-garde practice. While the essays with the titles "Modern American Archives and Scrapbook Modernism" (by Bartholomew Brinkman), "The Legacy of New York" (by Cary Nelson), "American Poetry and the Popular Front" (by Alan Wald), "Tracking the Fugitive Poets" (by Kieran Quinlan), "Land,

Place, and Nation: Toward an Indigenous American Poetics” (by Janet McAdams), Transpacific and Asian American Counterpoetics” (by Yunte Huang), and “Poet-Critics and Bureaucratic Administration” (by Evan Kindley), enhance and deepen the readers’ knowledge about the diverse socio-cultural and political character of the modern poetic scene. However, the enlightening material the volume already contains would have benefitted from an additional essay on electronic poetry and the whole range of experimentations that have been taking place in this field of poetic production in the last six decades. This would have rounded off the material the volume brings forth on experimental writing and the avant-garde. As for the additional sections contained in the volume entitled “Chronology List” and the “Guide to Further Reading” that are found at the beginning and the end of the volume respectively, they strengthen both its historical value and research potential.

- 6 Kalaidjian states in the introduction of the edited collection that one of his main concerns in this *Cambridge Companion* has been to “contextualize canonical and emerging poems against wider political, social, and cultural fields and forces” (1) as well as present modern American poetry as a “discursive community [not] dominated by canonical traditions but by ‘plurality, difference, and alterity’” (2). Indeed, this is evident in the attention the volume pays to African American, Indigenous American, Transpacific and Asian American poets which gives readers the opportunity not only to appreciate the challenges and prejudice these groups had to face but also to acknowledge their subversive poetic techniques serving as counter narratives or, in other words, as texts of resistance against cultural oppression and exclusion.
- 7 In the first essay emphasis is placed on the multiple changes U.S. underwent at the start of the twentieth century which asked for a change in the arts and in particular in the poetry production of the time. Starting with the reactions from the Fireside poets about the status of old poetry and its doubtful existence in the transient present, Timberman Newcomb shows how this “crisis of confidence” (13) has encouraged new voices to emerge. This also led, as he argues, to the institutional restructuring that allowed for poetry prizes and funding to become available and different societies, as is for example the Poetry Society of America, to be founded. The connection of this new kind of poetry with the concerns and changes of everyday reality has brought it closer to a far wider audience which as a result has made it more popular. The repositioning of experimental writing within a context of popularity has led to a reevaluation of the avant-garde in modern society not as something separate and distinct but as part of the poetry or literary changes already taking place.
- 8 In the following piece, Bartholomew Brinkman provides some really insightful information about the role scrapbooks, which have been kept both by poets themselves – as is the case for example of Edna St. Vincent Millay – and the readers, can play in our understanding of how modernist poetic practice has been received by the public in addition to introducing us in a much more tangible way to the writers themselves. This article highlights both the popularity and socio-cultural and political character of modernist poets through the examination of their scrapbooks which also have paved the path for a totally different way of reading and interpreting the poems these poets produced. Attention is also paid in this article to the rise of the modern poetry archives (Harvard Houghton Library, Library of Congress, Raymond Danowski Poetry Library at Emory University, Digital Public Library of America) that serve not merely as preservation spaces but as makers of literary history due to the socio-cultural and

historical significance of the material objects that they hold (scrapbooks, memorabilia, personal objects belonging to the poets).

- 9 The subsequent chapter by Alan Golding pays homage to the main representatives of modernist experimentation: T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, H.D., William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein. With reference to their most well-known poems – *The Cantos*, “*Sea Rose*” and “*Mid-Day*,” “*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*,” “*The Waste Land*,” *Tender Buttons*, “*Songs to Johannes*” – Golding highlights the experimental nature of their work and sheds light on the formation of an American poetic avant-garde. The interest of these modernists in revising or even in subverting poetic tradition revolutionizes poetry writing while bringing to the fore a far more social and collaborative pattern of poetic expression and creation.
- 10 Cary Nelson in his piece touches upon the various poets, visual artists and magazine editors that were based in New York at the start of the twentieth century transforming in the way the city “throughout the century into a vibrant center for the arts” (63). Since the opening of the Armory Show in Manhattan in 1913 and the appearance of the *Others* magazine, a number of poets started promoting their work through it, such as Mina Loy, William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore. Also, as Nelson notes, a number of movements and events – Harlem Renaissance, Black Power Movement, Vietnam War – has further contributed to the emergence in New York and Boston of a great variety of anti-imperialist poetry, as is the case with Native American and African American poets. Nelson also refers to the role New York Dada and Surrealism played in the appearance of a number of New York-based magazines – *291*, *391*, *The Blind Man*, *New York Dada*, *View* – that have had a political impact on the American poetry scene. The chapter ends with reference to Greenwich Village and some of the poets who lived there, which highlights the artistic vibrancy of certain areas in New York City.
- 11 Anne Day Dewey in her commentary focuses on the modern American long poem and the multiple transformations of the epic genre. Starting with a reference to Walt Whitman’s “*Song of Myself*,” she continues with her references to experimental modernist practice (Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, H.D. Muriel Rukeyser, Hart Crane), Harlem writing (Melvin Tolson), and extended lyric and sonnet sequences (Wallace Stevens, Gwendolyn Brooks, John Berryman). The essay finishes with references to contemporary examples of innovative epic poetic practice (Sharon Doubiago, Rodolfo Gonzalez, Marilyn Hacker, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha), translocal or processual poetics (Ron Silliman, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, John Ashbery, Ed Dorn, Rosemarie Waldrop, Lyn Hejinian) as well as mock epics (James Merrill). As Day Dewey notes, “[t]he long poem’s mixing and recontextualizing of historical materials, perspectives, and forms establishes the genre not only as distinct and self-transforming, but as a significant source of insight into the interactions, rifts, and lines of force traversing its poetic landscape” (75).
- 12 James Smethurst in his essay on Harlem Renaissance talks about “the connection of African American literature and art to a matrix of intersecting national and international avant-garde or vanguard movements, including modernism in the arts” (80). With attention paid to Fenton Johnson and Jean Toomer, Smethurst points out the “cutting edge” potential of African American writing through his references to lots of other practitioners as well as theorists so as to show the enriching and “cutting edge” dynamism of African American expression and artistic practice within the broader context of modernist experimentation and openness of poetic expression.

- 13 In the essay by Rachel Blau DuPlessis emphasis is placed on the objectivist poets – Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker, and Carl Rakosi – who stand in between late modernist and early contemporary poetic production. The writing techniques these poets followed together with their “socially progressive and linguistically experimental” (98) character highlight their centrality in the poetic scene of the 1960s and 1970s. However, for a very long time the work that was carried out by the Objectivists often remained in the periphery of attention. It is just recently that their contribution as well as their centrality and allegiance with the poetry scene of the 1960s and 1970s have been acknowledged.
- 14 Alan Wald in his account of the connection between American poetry production and the Popular Front starts his exploration at the time of the early Depression and ends with reference to the New Left in an effort to shed light on radical poetic practice. By drawing on poets such as Alfred Kreymborg, Stanley Burnshaw, Kenneth Fearing, Alfred Hayes, Muriel Rukeyser, Michael Gold, Langston Hughes and others, Wald traces the use of proletarian language in modernist poetry practice and the promotion of communist perceptions through the development of a kind of poetry that aimed at highlighting the “economic, political and cultural crises” of the time (106).
- 15 Kieran Quinlan focuses in the essay on the fugitive poets – John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren – in an attempt to highlight both their controversial political ideology and creative poetic explorations. With reference to the different phases of their development, Quinlan also touches upon their southern agrarianism often ensnared by the racial politics and ideologies of the time. He then goes on to comment on the role of this group of poets in the appearance of the American New Criticism in addition to presenting their theoretical takes on poetry writing and impact on future poets.
- 16 Stephen Burt concentrates in his essay on the mid-twentieth century post-war poets – as is the case of Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, E.L. Mayo, Richard Wilbur – whose use of traditional poetic forms is often characterized by a skeptical and doubtful tone as they express in their writings “their own distrust of national mission, historical progress, religious salvation, or radical artistic novelty” (130). Some of the themes they explore have to do with war victims, maps and territories or childhood as the “last space free of institutional control” (139) in an effort to capture their oscillating feelings between what had been lost and what still needed to be preserved at a time when every sense of trust had been shaken.
- 17 Michael Thurston’s exploration of confessional poetry moves beyond the information about “the poets’ mental illnesses to examine the roles played in their work by discourses of treatment and cure, especially the Freudian psychoanalysis” (143). With attention paid to Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Allen Ginsberg, this essay explains how the use of certain psychoanalytical tactics succeeds in shedding light on the moment the confessional poem attempts to capture as well as on the inner and cultural tensions it attempts to convey. Due to the popularization of certain convulsive therapies in the treatment of mental illness in the 1940s and 1950s in the US, the poets mentioned in the essay either directly or figuratively insert information in their poems with regard to these experiences in an effort to criticize the “disciplinary practices” (148) and the “mechanics of institutionalization” used in the American society of the time for the construction of subjectivity.

- 18 Kaplan Harris in his piece on Black Mountain Poetry starts his commentary with reference to the major role played by the experimental school of the Black Mountain College and the *Black Mountain Review* in the development of the contemporary American poetry avant-garde. In both cases attention is paid to the publication of Charles Olson's, poet's and Black Mountain College Rector's, seminal essay of "Projective Verse" as well as to Robert Creeley's *Review* through which he managed to create a diverse and vast poet network comprised of his own contemporaries and other former modernist poet associates. This emphasis on subversive poetics and counter-cultural poetic voices also sets the foundation for Donald Allen's editorial work at Grove Press that in the 1960s led to the publication of his anthology with the title *The New American Poetry*. With this anthology, he manages to introduce the work of a number of non-mainstream poets to a wide American audience while highlighting the importance of Olson's poetry, hence Black Mountain's, in the promotion of the 1960s experimental poetry scene.
- 19 Maria Damon focuses in her essay on the 1946-1965 period during which both the Beat and the San Francisco Renaissance poets made their appearance. Sharing similarities and differences, these poets attempted to capture the conformity of a politically sterilized, homophobic and racially segregated American society. Through the exposure of the white male and sensationalized Beat as well as the all-inclusive and gay San Francisco poetry scene, Damon introduces us to the intellectual and aesthetic concerns of two connected but variant groups that sought their own way of expression beyond "an overly rigid society" (173). Their allegiance to French existentialism, Zen Buddhism, African American culture and English as well as American romanticism delineates their literary and philosophical origins. What is certain about these two groups is that both the exuberance of the Beats and the scholarly dedication of the San Francisco Renaissance subverted and creatively challenged the American mainstream by radicalizing poetic practice.
- 20 Evie Shockley's essay is touching upon the formation of a much more diversified and enhanced black poetry aesthetic that departs from as well as embellishes the initial nationalist scope of the Black American Movement (BAM). With reference to various poetic voices from the 1960s and the 1980s, such as Sonia Sanchez, Rita Dove, Yusef Komunyakaa, Harryette Mullen, Kevin Young, Natasha Trethewey and others, Shockley is shedding light on the attention that current scholarship has paid to "the wide variety of ways in which poets explore matters of race and 'blackness'" (188), which has led to a reassessment of BAM's early nationalist character and socio-cultural contribution. The recent acknowledgement of its diverse regional activity and allegiances with other ethnic groups highlights that there is not a singular but "many various black aesthetics" (186).
- 21 Edward Brunner concentrates in his discussion on the first and second generation of New York American poets and on their interaction with visual arts (surrealism and action painting) in their effort to "revolutioniz[e] the texture, scope, and tone of American poetry" (196). John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler and Barbara Guest approach the urban landscape of New York from different temporal, spatial, conscious and unconscious perspectives in a "painterly" manner in an attempt to capture the multiplicity and hidden details of everyday city reality. This almost surreal take on external and inner realities is further intensified by the following poets – Alice Notley, Anne Waldman, Diane Wakoski, Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett – who lived at a time of escalated concerns and tensions due to the Vietnam War and "agitated domesticity" (202). Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Bly, James Wright, W. S. Merwin and A.R. Ammons experimented in their poetry with the "deep image" that concentrated on the exploration

of free association of materials as well as on “the deforming nature of the human perspective” (205).

- 22 Janet McAdams writes about the Native American poets that have emerged after the Native American Renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s. Moving beyond the theme of identity, a number of emerging voices – Simon Ortiz, Diance Glancy, Linda Hogan, Deborah Miranda, Gladys Cardiff, Layli Long Soldier – combine their exploration of the absence and presence of their native land and indigenous subjectivity with experimentation with the poetic form, lineation and lyric voice. By drawing on a series of interesting examples from the poets mentioned, McAdams highlights the importance of poetic “localities – material and textual – [...] [as] they are charged with the historical condition of land theft and its varied implications: diaspora and removal, but also reclamation and resilience” (220).
- 23 Yunte Huang concentrates on the counterpoetics produced by various Asian American poets by drawing on examples of Chinese, Japanese, Philippines-born and Hawaiian practitioners. With reference to particular poems and techniques, Huang comments on the enriching role Asian American poetry has played in enhancing and diversifying American literary monolingualism. By focusing on the writings of Carlos Bulosan José Villa, Lawson Fusao Inada, Theresa Cha, Myung Mi Kim, Lois-Ann Yamanaka and John Yau, Huang highlights the contribution of these writers towards lifting the existing racial stereotypes while arguing in their poems against “colonial violence, historical traumas, and narrative closures” (232).
- 24 Barrett Watten in the essay on language writing highlights its generative and urban character so as to explain its plural and decentered mode of expression. Its identification with the 1970s New York and San Francisco politics and its adherence to radical and individualistic but not collective poetic voices makes this a “widely dispersed, multi-generational, and culturally diverse” (239) form of experimental poetic practice. Although it draws, but with a revisionist twist, on key modernist practitioners, language writing initially served as a response to postmodern theory and theorists as well as to many other theoretical schools that emerged in the 1980s. Watten concludes his informative exploration of language writing with reference to the developments that have occurred since 2001 due to the emergence of new groups and various online and social media experimentations.
- 25 In the final essay of the volume, Evan Kindley comments on the role of the American poet-critic in the “administration of large bureaucratic institutions” (249). With particular attention paid to the case of Sterling Brown and Archibald MacLeish as well as to R. P. Blackmur and John Crowe Ransom, the essay sheds light on how the appointment of poets by the Roosevelt administration and Library of Congress, the funded support provided by philanthropic foundations (Rockefeller), and the collaborative initiatives organized by philanthropic organizations and universities have promoted since the 1930s and 1940s the collection, archiving and cataloguing of literary – even though presented as ethnographic at the time – material in addition to promoting the emergence in the post WWII era of “professionalized academic criticism” (256).
- 26 On the basis of what has already been mentioned in combination with the scholarly material each essay in this volume contains, one can effectively argue that Kalaidjian’s edited project constitutes a successful endeavor. The breadth of resources its contributors draw from and the scholarly research made available in its pages make this book an invaluable guide for both researchers and general readers through the modernist

and postmodernist American poetry scene. The poetic voices that it gathers highlight not only the literary value and the multifaceted socio-political character of American poetic production but also the influences and bridges that have developed between early, mid and late twentieth century poets. Indeed, this is a book that due to the poetry terrain it attempts to cover it actually consolidates the important role that poetry plays both for the American socio-cultural establishment and the formation of a transcultural and transnational self.